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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3527
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000958

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/16/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: GOT INSIDER SAYS TUNISIA READY FOR FASTER
POLITICAL REFORM

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) AND (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) During a ninety-minute courtesy call with the Ambassador on July 12, Arab League Deputy Secretary General and GOT insider Chedli Neffati told the Ambassador that, while security concerns had slowed reform in the 1990s, Tunisia today is ready for more political liberalization. However, "we are not all in agreement" about the need for change despite the fact that most Tunisians today are moderate and reject extremism. On regional issues, Neffati said Algeria had refused to engage on Western Sahara and bemoaned Iranian influence in the region. End summary.

TWO REGIMES

¶2. (C) Neffati contrasted today's regime with the instability that marked the end of Bourguiba's rule in the 1980s. Neffati explained that the Bourguiba regime was weak in its last ten years, with "everyone" thinking about who would be president after Bourguiba. Bourguiba's "fatal error" was neglecting the importance of religion to Tunisians. This weakness led to the rise of Islamists and labor unrest. In contrast, Ben Ali today is not "moribund" and has done much to show his respect for Islam, including creating a Ministry of Religious Affairs and supporting Zeitouna University. Ben Ali, said Neffati, "did a lot at the beginning" of his regime. But the turmoil in Algeria during the 1990s threatened to spill over and "we didn't have a free hand to continue change in Tunisia." Therefore, Neffati explained, maintaining security became paramount.

LET THE REFORMS BEGIN...

¶3. (S) Today, however, things are calmer and Tunisia is ready for more change. The Ambassador pressed Neffati on the need for political change, noting Tunisia's shortfalls on freedom of expression and association. "Maybe I am naive," said Neffati, "but I am a democrat and believe our country could be a model." Tunisia's economic and social development has provided the necessary foundation for the political plan. Neffati opined that he hoped there will be more political progress after November's twentieth anniversary of Ben Ali's rule. But he warned, "We are not all in agreement" and some think further reform is not possible.

...AND THE OPPOSITION OPPOSE

14. (S) Joking that when he was Minister of Interior he knew all the opposition political leaders "from their files," Neffati said that he also knows them all personally. Contrasting other officials' comments, Neffati argued that most opposition leaders are nationalists who can participate and want to discuss Tunisia's challenges. Further, Ben Ali "is convinced" that the opposition should have a role in politics, as demonstrated by his decision in 1994 to reserve twenty percent of parliamentary seats for the opposition.

PEOPLE ARE READY

15. (C) Noting that when he was a governor he visited rural villages to meet with people, Neffati argued that Tunisians are open and moderate and can quickly adapt to change. Because of this, he argued that religious extremism is not a danger in Tunisia, because "very few" support terrorist ideologies. "No one in Tunisia is an extremist because of the party, government or Ben Ali," said Neffati, but extremism is fueled by the situation in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and even Algeria. And, in his view, even this small number is a lot for a country of ten million.

REGIONAL ISSUES

16. (C) The Ambassador raised the Arab League's role on regional issues, including the Western Sahara, Iraq and Lebanon. In response, Neffati noted that AL SYG Amr Moussa

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has done nothing on the Western Sahara issue because Algeria, a major AL financier, "asked us not to discuss it." Even President Ben Ali could try to do something, said Neffati, except Algeria says "we're not a party (to the dispute)." On Iraq, Neffati said he regretted the Arab world had not played a larger role, adding that the United States and Iran cannot find a solution alone. Ruefully he noted, "Who could have imagined Iranian influence in Lebanon, Palestine and Syria?" Commenting that the image of the United States in the Arab world is tarnished, Neffati stressed that Arabs have a problem with US policy, not the American people. If there is a solution for Iraq and Palestine, "all of this will be forgotten," concluded Neffati.

COMMENT AND BIO NOTE

17. (S/NF) Comment: Unlike the vast majority of Tunisian officials who argue that the slow pace of reform is just right given Tunisia's history and experience, Neffati is the first GOT insider who has directly argued in favor of more political reform now. He also articulated what others have only hinted, that two views on reform exist inside the government. What is unclear is whether or not Neffati is temporarily sidelined at the Arab League or if he has fallen out of favor. Whatever the case, Post will continue to develop Neffati as a contact to see how he could support our efforts to promote the Freedom Agenda. End Comment.

18. (C) Bio Note: Neffati is a political insider with wide and detailed knowledge of Tunisia. A long-time party activist, he was governor of Kairouan (1982-84) and Beja (1984-88). In 1988, shortly after the Ben Ali coup, he was appointed Secretary of State for Security before serving as Minister of

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Interior. In 1990, he became Minister of Justice, then RCD Secretary General for five years (1991-96). In 1996, Neffati

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was named Minister of Social Affairs, then Chairman of the Economic and Social Council from 2001 until 2002, when he was reappointed Minister of Social Affairs. In 2005 he became Tunisia's ambassador to Egypt, before being appointed Arab League Deputy Secretary General in December 2006.

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